

Testimony Submitted

by

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on the "Academic Achievement for All Act"

Before the Committee on Education and the Workforce

May 20, 1999

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of those principles and provisions being discussed for the proposed Academic Achievement for All Act (Straight A's Act). I believe that the proposal offers the type of systemic education reform which will improve student achievement and standardized test scores in cities and communities throughout the nation.

Prior to my service as Mayor of Jersey City, our schools became the first system in the United States to be directly administered by state government. Students who are now Juniors in high school were in the First Grade when the state seized control of Jersey City's schools in 1989.

Our annual school budget, which was \$180 million at the time of the state's takeover, is now \$380 million. Despite this enormous increase in spending for a district which has had a fairly stable population of about 32,000 students, test scores have shown modest improvement. More than half of those who enter our high schools still drop out and violence in our schools has increased.

The lesson learned from the takeover of Jersey City's public schools is relevant to this issue because the state made a fundamental mistake in believing that it could effect needed academic improvement and accountability in Jersey City without dramatically changing the basic public school paradigm. The state's emphasis on the centralization of decision-making, the promulgation of many rules, the considerable amount of paperwork imposed on our administrators and teachers, and an emphasis on accountability for compliance has, over a long

span, resulted in little more than just that, compliance. Rather than placing the emphasis on children, state education leaders have focused on improving compliance with a flawed education model. Today's governmentally controlled, uniform approach to education fails to acknowledge that each child has different needs which must be met in order to foster learning. Indeed, the state has failed to acknowledge that our problem is not a lack of money, nor is it a lack of committed, quality educators. Our problem is much more fundamental: there is simply no single, homogenized model of education that will work with a population as diverse, and often disadvantaged, as Jersey City's.

Children with special needs are not unique to our inner cities, but they are more abundant. For example, 41% of Jersey City families live on fixed incomes -- either welfare or social security -- while only 13.% of families statewide are on welfare. Urban centers also tend to be more ethnically diverse and to attract more recent immigrants. For instance, 14% of Jersey City residents immigrated to the United States within the last 10 years, and 41% of Jersey City children speak a language other than English at home.

With enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress did something right. By providing benefits to low-income children without regard to where they go to school, Congress rightly recognized that government's proper concern is to assure a literate citizenry formed in wisdom and virtue while remaining neutral with regard to the management of the school. While access to basic educational services is no longer an issue, too many of the schools to which our poorest inner-city children have had access have been mediocre at best. Still, as long as these schools complied with the bureaucracy's rules and regulations, these schools were

left free to persist in their failure.

The Congress set an important precedent when it targeted benefits to the child without regard to the school he or she may attend. So too, the proposed "Straight A's Act" sets a most important precedent by shifting accountability from regulatory compliance to what ought to be government's only concern in education, academic achievement. By allowing a Superintendent the flexibility to bundle benefits and craft educational programs tailored made to the needs of his students, we unshackle the dedication and professionalism of many educators. The sixty programs comprising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act are, well intended. However, many of them have little to do with the reality of urban classrooms. Urban children are no less intelligent than their suburban counterparts; yet, many students come to school wounded because of family problems relating to alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty and neglect. Too often they encounter a governmentally controlled and uniform public education system which compounds that neglect by sending the message: "This is the way we teach children, if this doesn't work for you, too bad."

Though federal education funds constitute only 7% of all spending on K to 12 education, they have a profound influence on our public and private schools. Too often these programs substitute activity for learning and results. Just as government health funds would not carry instructions to a surgeon on how to perform a delicate surgical procedure, so too, government should respect the right of teachers, principals and parents, working together, to tailor educational programs in ways which which best meet the needs of the children they serve.

If local school districts are to have the flexibility they need to more effectively serve students, it is important that the federal government free states from the programs, rules and regulations which have only the appearance of serving real needs. In holding states and large school districts accountable for measurable academic results, we can hope and expect that state departments of education will shift from an emphasis on accountability for compliance to an emphasis on measurable results. The proposal you are considering is not another federal mandate. It merely provides the option to bold Governors and education leaders who believe that our public schools can do better. Those who wish to receive money and administer programs the old way will be free to do so. I would also strongly recommend that you give the option of the "Straight A's Act" flexibility to large school districts in any states which do not choose to participate. The problems and needs of a large urban district can be quite different and even at odds with those of the surrounding state. I would also urge that you provide the maximum degree of flexibility under the provisions of ESEA's Title I. It is here where dedicated teachers and principals need the greatest freedom to create the programs and the schools within schools, that can remediate so many of the learning problems faced by young urban children.

Finally, I would also urge the Congress to be mindful of the enormously important role that private and parochial schools play in our inner cities. One quarter of Jersey City students are enrolled in privately managed schools. Accordingly, they provide valuable alternatives to our public schools. Many students in these private schools receive services and the schools receive equipment through provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It is important that they continue to do so.

The proposal you are considering presents an excellent opportunity for the Congress to address many problems that private schools have experienced under ESEA. Using the Local Education Agency (LEA) as a conduit of federal assistance has been inefficient and an obstacle for many private school students. I would urge that private schools be allowed to purchase goods and obtain services through State Education Agencies rather than the local school district. Under Title I, services to private school students in New Jersey are funneled through the district in which the child lives. Under Title II, IV and VI, services and the provision of educational materials is made by the district in which the school is located. Because many of our private and parochial schools draw students from a broad geographic area, some private school principals are required to attend meetings and abide by the procedures of more than a dozen public school districts. By making the provision of federally funded goods and services the responsibility of the State Education Agency (SEA), it is more likely that those with responsibility for providing services and products to the private school sector will be better trained and familiar with applicable law and regulations. It would also provide private school officials, who act in loco parentis in the appropriate use of these funds, with a single point of contact and greatly reduce time spent in meetings and regulatory compliance.

Again thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important education reform. With passage of this legislation Congress will provide a powerful tool to government leaders and educators who are determined to rescue "a nation at risk." Many thanks.